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Numbers no Criterion of Truth :

O R,

THE HISTORY OF
THE
PROPHET MICAIAH,

Considered and Applied in

A

S E R M O N,

Preached before the Protestant Dissenting
MINISTERS of *Cumberland*, at their general
Meeting in *Cockermouth*,

AUGUST 16, 1769.

By RADCLIFFE SCHOLEFIELD.

Vir bonus quod honeste se facturum putaverit, faciet, etiam si laboriosum erit: faciet, etiam si damnosum erit: faciet, etiam si periculosum erit; rursus quod turpe erit, non faciet, etiam si pecuniam affert, etiam si voluptatem, etiam si potentiam. Ab honesto nulla re deterebitur. Ad turpia nulla spe invitabitur: Senec: Epist.

WHITEHAVEN:

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TO

The REVEREND

Mr. SAMUEL DAWSON.

REV. SIR,

AFTER yielding to the opinion and solicitations of others, in the publication of the following discourse ; to whom, can I with greater propriety, dedicate it, than to you : whose early care and fidelity as a master, and prudent affectionate advice as a friend, laid the foundation of my future studies and pursuits, and have a claim to my warmest acknowledgments. The writer pretends not to have offered any new arguments upon a subject which hath been so often canvassed : He only presents and begs your acceptance of an antient story, dressed up in such a manner, as he hopes may illustrate what has been frequently urged under a different form ; and strengthen those general principles upon which he apprehends, the spread and interest of truth depend. And here, give me leave to express the pleasure which (while engaged in this subject) I have received from reflecting ; that there are persons rising up in the established church, who breath something of the same noble spirit, which animated the breast of the prophet Micaiah. From such appearances ; I cannot help looking forward with satisfaction to some future era ; in the hope of that glorious and long wished

DEDICATION.

wished for event: *A reformation arising from the clergy themselves.* I figure in my imagination, a period; when all the worthy and conscientious part of that reverend body of men, shall no longer have their minds harrassed with prescriptions and articles of human composure; but nobly strengthening, and strengthened by each other, they will plead, and plead effectually, for that liberty wherewith CHRIST has made them free; and render the church all glorious within. If I am too sanguine in my hopes; I do not outgo the wishes, of many sincere friends to the interests of truth and christianity, of every denomination. It is even a circumstance no longer to be concealed; that the most wise and excellent members of your church, join heartily with those who have been represented (tho' falsely) as its bitter enemies, in this wish: namely, that while deists on the one hand, and enthusiasts on the other, are taking such advantages against the public teachers of religion, they might not have it in their power, with any degree of plausibility, to urge; that these, either preach contrary to those articles which they have solemnly subscribed; or, thro' an adherence to them deliver doctrines, which on scripture authority, they cannot defend. That you may long be continued an ornament to your profession, and a friend to the religious and best interests of mankind, is the sincere wish,

of your affectionate Relative, Friend,

and humble Servant,

RADCLIFFE SCHOLEFIELD.



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S E R M O N, &c.

I. KINGS, xxii. 14.

*And Micaiah said, as the LORD liveth, what
the LORD saith unto me, that will I speak.*



OUR text contains a noble answer, to a very base proposal. An answer, which reflects the highest honour on its author; and, in a connected light, affords several valuable hints of instruction to mankind, thro' all ages, and in every situation.

THE circumstances, which gave rise to it, are as follow.----Ahab, one of the worst of the kings of Israel, being desirous of recovering Ramoth-Gilead from the Syrians, engaged

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Jehoshaphat, king of Judea, in an alliance with him : This last, a prince remarkable for his piety and trust in God, requested the opinion of the prophets, as to the present enterprise ; and Ahab, willing, at all events, to secure his approbation, and concurrence, quickly assembled them together, to the number of four hundred ; who all, with one accord, advised them to go up to battle ; and assured them of certain victory and success.

WHATEVER there was in the manners and behaviour of these persons ; whether (as seems most probable) Jehoshaphat suspected they were the prophets of Baal ; or their flattery and confidence displeased him ; certain it is, there was something which excited the suspicions of this prince, and left him unsatisfied with their determination. He, therefore, asks whether no other prophet yet remained, of whom they might enquire.

THE king of Israel, either apprehending that the truth could not be concealed ; or hoping that even the contrary opinion of one man would have no great weight, frankly acknowledged there was another ; but, for his part, he never chose to consult him : nay,

I hate him, saith he, because he prophesieth not good but evil. However, at the solicitation of Jehoshaphat, a messenger was dispatched for him; and, in the mean time, the four hundred prophets employed every art to strengthen their credit and interest. Zedekiah, in particular, made to himself horns of iron, and employing them, as an emblem, said----
Thus shalt thou push the Syrians till thou hast consumed them. In which declaration they all unanimously agreed.

WHILE this truly ridiculous farce was acting in the presence of the two kings; the messenger, who was sent to bring Micaiah, took care (either out of friendship to the prophet; or, probably, with the view of serving his royal master) to inform him how the point had already been determined; and suggests what he thought a prudent and seasonable piece of advice.---*Behold, the words of the prophets declare good unto the king with one mouth: let thy word, I pray thee, be like the word of one of them, and speak that which is good.*

THE words of the text contain the answer; and shew the emotions which such a proposal excited----for Micaiah, with a becoming

indignation and resolution of mind, immediately replied : *As the LORD liveth, what the LORD saith unto me, that will I speak.*

Thus far as to the general connection of the words : every other circumstance, necessary for illustrating the present sentiment, will naturally fall in with the method in which we propose to discourse from them.

I. WE shall consider the temper and behaviour of the prophet : and then,

II. ENQUIRE into, and lay before you, a variety of observations arising from this portion of the sacred history, which appear of general use and importance.

THE great, leading circumstance, which strikes us in this declaration of the prophet, is the *fortitude* and *resolution* of mind he displays,-----as appears ;

I. FROM considering the *offence* it would necessarily give the person before whom he was going to speak, and with whose character and views he was well acquainted.

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SOME commentators have supposed, and not without reason, that Micaiah was the prophet, of whom mention is made in the xxth chapter of this book of Kings, the 35th and following verses. We there read of his placing himself in the way of Ahab ; and, by a lively emblem, representing the folly of dismissing Benhadad, and the fatal consequences which would attend it. The king, we are told, went down to his house heavy and sore displeased : and, probably, this incident might occasion the reflection in the present chapter, that he hated him, *because he prophesied not good but evil concerning him.* Of this the prophet was fully sensible ; and he knew that (being already the object of his aversion) what he had further to offer would only increase it.

WE do not, therefore, find him, as formerly, intruding upon him. He had met with too little success, to hope for a favourable hearing ; and, probably, if not thus publicly called upon, would have buried in silence the prophetic view he entertained of his approaching overthrow and death. A court, so corrupt as Ahab's, was no place

place for a true prophet of the LORD to meet with attention and regard; and this, much less, when necessity, not choice, occasioned the application: when flattery, not truth, was professedly sought; and when, in the room of faithful counsel, he was desired to serve a present turn; and the most acceptable offering would have been, to sacrifice every principle of integrity to royal ambition, and court intrigue.

SUCH considerations might have been sufficient to awe a weaker mind, but, upon that of the prophet, they had no effect. He nobly determines, when thus called upon, to avow the truth; and, in opposition to the time-serving counsel of the messenger, immediately replied. *As the LORD liveth, what the LORD saith unto me, that will I speak.*

2. HE could not but foresee the little influence his counsel and declarations would have upon the minds of his hearers.

THE messenger informed him how the prophets had decided the question; and pleads it as an argument why he should fall in with their sentiments: and it must be
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confessed, upon the principles of worldly policy ; or, what is too commonly called *prudence*, the advice was reasonable and highly eligible ; for what influence could the opinion of one person be supposed to have against so great a number ? what folly and madness ; or (in more modern phrase) what *heresy* ; did there appear in dissenting from so reverend a body, as the *whole convocation* of Israelitish prophets ; and this before judges who might be supposed highly prejudiced in their favour. As to Ahab, his views and resolutions were well known ; while, in the mind of Jehoshaphat, the opinion of so many would, naturally, over-balance that of a single person, to whom he was equally a stranger ; and of whose character he had received an unfavourable impression. What stronger proofs could he give of the *truth* of his mission than what the other prophets had already offered.---- As to any miraculous testimony, the history is silent : while, if confidence is admitted as an argument ; in this kind of evidence, they far excelled him----But farther.

3. THE *resolution* of the prophet riseth in our view and estimation, according as we reflect upon the certain prospect of suffering which lay before him. HE

He was not going to appear in the presence of one on a level with himself; whose anger he had no reason to regard, or whose favour it was of no importance to cultivate; but before a powerful prince, proud and haughty in his temper; and severe and tyrannical in his government. He was obliged to oppose his inclinations in a favourite point, in the accomplishing of which, he had hitherto met with success: and tho' the opinion of one might not destroy those hopes, which the corrupt voices of so many prophets had raised; yet a prince of his disposition would scarcely forgive the man who attempted it.

To this we may further add the treatment he might naturally expect from the other prophets; who, standing high in court favour, and resenting the insolence of the person who ventured to call in question their gifts and judgment, would readily employ their credit and power for his destruction. Shall I yet mention the sentiments of the vulgar; who ever, or (for the most part,) prejudiced in favour of a majority; would look---many with a kind of horror---others with scorn---but *few*, with an eye of pity and

and complacency upon one who dissented from a body of men, whose persons they had been taught to revere, and whose opinions were held sacred. Nor did the event at all falsify such natural and just apprehensions : For no sooner had Micaiah delivered the will of the LORD, with that becoming modesty and fortitude, which truth inspires ; then Zedekiah came near and smote him upon the cheek ; treating him, at the same time, with the most opprobrious language : And Ahab gave command for his being put into prison, and fed with the bread and water of affliction, until his return. I shall only add farther,

4. THE strong presumptive evidence we have, that considerable *honours* and *rewards* would have been the consequence of his compliance, and falling in with the designs and views of Ahab.

It is not unreasonable to suppose, that the messenger was employed to solicit his concurring voice and approbation. The form of address, and strong symptoms of disdain in the prophet's answer, seem plainly to indicate it.---*Behold now the words of the prophets declare good unto the king, let thy word, I pray*
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*thee, be like the word of one of them, and speak that which is good----*As a friend, I would advise compliance with his will. Oppose not such a number of voices ; nor the inclinations of a prince whose anger can destroy ; or who, for this service, is well disposed to reward and exalt thee.

A man, governed by worldly and sordid motives, would easily perceive, and with readiness have embraced, so favourable an occasion for securing the countenance of the great ; and acquiring the emoluments of the world. But the prophet was influenced by different views : He entertained no regard for honours, which were to be obtained at the expence of truth ; and never conferred, under so wicked an administration, but as the wages of iniquity. Neither the certain prospect of suffering, nor the most tempting hopes of reward, could shake his resolution, and divert him from his purpose----He nobly answered, *As the LORD liveth, what the LORD saith unto me, that will I speak.*

If it should here be urged, that pride and affectation of singularity might influence his conduct ; or that with such prospects before him,

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him, it deserves being censured as foolish and rash, rather than entitled to the appellation of resolution and fortitude: Let the nature and excellence of the cause to which he professeth so inflexible an adherence be considered. It was in itself, the cause of truth; and this, as to objects of the utmost importance. The present occasion was no less favourable, than that, which Elijah had lately enjoyed, for vindicating the honour of the true God; and confirming the minds of the Israelites in a proper regard for, and worship of him. As his declaration, and those of the other prophets, were directly opposite, they afforded a proof, according as the predictions were fulfilled, of the different influence under which they spoke and acted. In this light, it is plain, Micaiah viewed the subject; for when Ahab spoke of returning in peace, he replied, *If thou return at all in peace, the L O R D has not spoken by me*: And turning to the spectators, he adds, *Hearken, O ye people, every one of you*: i. e. Take notice of what passeth, in order to learn by the event, the true object of your worship.

THE whole, therefore, is to be considered as a contest betwixt false prophets, and a

prophet of the LORD ; by which their respective powers, and the truth of their several tenets, were to be decided. This was the consideration which armed his breast with resolution, and the manner of his expression marks, at once, the warmth of his zeal, and the principles by which it was supported-----
As the LORD liveth, saith he, i. e. As surely as I am persuaded of his existence, of his power to succour, or of his favour to reward, and make me happy ; so firmly am I resolved to adhere to his cause, and deliver what he reveals to me.

WHILE engaged in so generous a design, and serving under such a master, it was wise in the prophet to forego the most flattering earthly prospects, and incur the greatest temporary evils. The favour of Ahab was ever uncertain, and, necessarily, short lived ; but in God he had a firm friend, and the hope of a durable reward. In complying with the solicitations of the messenger, public contempt, as well as private remorse, would attend him when the event shewed the fallacy of the prediction : But from his present resolution, tho' the clouds of earthly affliction might, for a season, overshadow him ; yet,
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in the end, his truth and righteousness would spring forth as the beams of the morning.

AGAIN, if it is objected, that Micaiah at first concurred with the prophets, and bid Ahab go up, and prosper ; for the LORD would deliver the place into his hands---It is plain this was spoken ironically. There was something in his manner, which conveyed different sentiments to his hearers ; and engaged the king to adjure him that he would freely communicate his opinion. *How often, saith he, shall I adjure thee to tell me nothing but the truth, in the name of the LORD.* Upon which, with the utmost plainness and sincerity, he foretold his approaching overthrow and death-----The prophet might employ this method of address to shew, the little effect he expected his declaration would have upon the mind of Ahab ; or to evidence, that a regard to truth, and no enmity to his person, actuated his conduct ; or, lastly, real prudence might dictate this measure ; since, while the earnest solicitation of the king drew from him the fatal secret ; this, ought to have lessened the weight of his anger against him.

THUS do we find, upon the whole, that this
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eminent person hath left us a shining example of fortitude ; not like that false bravery which presseth into danger, because unseen ; but founded upon reflection, tempered by prudence, and supported by the most rational and exalted motives.

BUT however amiable such a character appears, merely as an object of contemplation ; (and surely a good man, thus steady in the cause of truth, and superior to the emotions of fear, the solicitations of flattery, and the dictates of worldly self interest, is the noblest object of this state) yet we have attempted the foregoing sketch of it, principally, with a view to those reflexions, which obviously arise from hence : with regard to the nature of truth in general, the manner of enquiring into, and judging of it ; and the most effectual means, for promoting it's spread and interest. This leads me to the

II. THING proposed, namely the offering a variety of observations upon this portion of the sacred history, which appear of general use, and importance. And,

I. WE may clearly perceive, that truth
neither

neither depends upon, nor can be judged of by the numbers, which, in any given case, appear to admit and support it.

THO' in the writings of the antient heathen philosophers we meet with high and just encomiums upon the clearness and efficacy of truth, when properly placed before the eye of the mind; yet they seem universally to have agreed, that it requires close attention, accurate enquiries, and suitable dispositions, to discover, acknowledge, and embrace it. It is the advice of Solomon, and this, doubtless with a reference to its nature, as well as value, *to seek for it as silver, and dig as for hidden treasure.*---When therefore, we consider the indolence of some men---the slender advantages of others---the various avocations of life, ---and the several prejudices, passions, vices, and opposite interests, prevailing in the world; we may easily conceive the possibility of error being generally countenanced; while the friends of *truth* are few, and meet with the utmost discouragement.

BUT what a little attention to the state of the world might lead us to suspect, the present history abundantly confirms---Here was the

the whole convocation of Israelitish prophets against one prophet of the LORD-----Four hundred opposing their voices to that of a single man ; and yet the truth (the only auxiliary he had) was upon his side. What is even more remarkable, here was a numerous body of men, whose characters and office ought, especially, to have been above fraud and dissimulation, combined in the support of error ; and thro' secular views, foretelling events, of which, they must be inwardly conscious they had no knowledge. Nor have later ages been destitute of facts which corroborate the foregoing remark-----Witness the spread of Mahometanism and Popery in the world : So that let numbers be the criterion of truth, and we embrace the impostures of the one, or the superstitious rites of the other : nay, pursue the argument to its full extent, and we sink into the darkness and blind idolatry of paganism itself.

ALLOW me further to appeal to the manner in which truth has been discovered, and gained ground in the christian church : ---Doth history give the credit of it to councils, assemblies, convocations, and synods ?---Hath it not been first learnt and
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propounded by some individuals; who, with more enlarged minds, and by stricter enquiry, have entered into its nature; and, like the prophet Micaiah, have ventured to support it, at the hazard of their lives----The world, my Brethren, has seen the day, when a *Luther*, a *Calvin*, a *Ridley*, a *Latimer*, and a few other reformers, had more truth on their side, and greater honesty to declare it, than the whole *consistory* of cardinals, bishops, and priests, (by what ever title distinguished) with a pretended infallible pope at their head ---- But I observe,

2. THAT neither can we rely upon any external *venerableness* of particular characters and offices; or, upon the positive *manner* in which any doctrine is delivered; while, on the other hand, we learn the folly and danger of being prejudiced against doctrines, from the low *situation*, or popular *contempt* in which the preachers of them are held.

WHAT set of men can we suppose more venerable in their appearance, or held in greater esteem by the Israelitish nation, than the four hundred prophets now assembled together. Without doubt, they were what a *bench of*
C *bishops*

bishops, or an assembly of divines, would be thought at the present day. That they were false prophets, and, most probably, the four hundred of the grove (Elijah had destroyed the rest) who eat at the table of Jezabel, we readily allow; and, consequently, the comparison may appear invidious and unjust. But we ought to reflect, that the real difference of character enters not here into the question; the only point is, in what light they were esteemed; and whether the people, from this prepossession, had not equal reason to rely upon their decision; as we can have, solely, upon this account, to admit as true, what any body of men shall dictate to us.

WE may now, probably be surprized, that any deference should be paid to, or confidence placed in them; But whence doth this arise?---Is it not owing merely, to our not being the disciples of that age, and having no prejudice in their favour? Should we not, probably, have entertained the same sentiments with the Israelites, previous to the accomplishment of the prediction? Without we can prove then, that the power and will to deceive, is confined to particular parties and seasons; or, that prejudice, self interest,
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and corrupt passions cannot influence any set of men, when collected into a numerous body, which biass them as individuals ; no argument can arise from their titles, the general veneration which is paid them, or other external appearances, to make us implicitly accept their determinations as the criterion of truth.

AGAIN ; if the *confidence* with which men utter their sentiments is either a proof of their sincerity, or an absolute ground for our reliance upon them ; where, shall we meet with a greater degree of it, than in the history before us-----*Go up say they, for the LORD shall deliver the place into thine hand -----And with these, or after this manner, saith Zedekiah* (probably imitating with his horns of iron the action of a furious beast) *shalt thou push the Syrians till thou hast consumed them----* *Which way went the spirit of the LORD, addressing himself to Micaiah, from me, to speak unto thee ? -----* Had the story been purposely intended to guard the mind against these inlets to error and deception, no contrast could be drawn in a more striking light, or tend more powerfully to affect us.

ON the one side, we see numbers,---venerableness of character,---unanimity of voice, consummate assurance,---and court favour.--- On the other---Micaiah---singular in his opinion---modest in his declarations---probably, mean and low in his appearance---and unsupported by any thing, but conscious integrity.---How instructive is the event---This man, tho' now despised and hated, laid open the truth ; while they, with all these favourable appearances, became convicted of the most shameful flattery and falshood. Our pointing out the fallacy of the foregoing rules considered as *criteria*s of truth, would be of little importance, if it was not for observing,

3. THE great *influence* they have had upon the minds of men thro' all ages of the world.

JEHOSHOPHAT, tho' he appears to have suspected the prophets ; was engaged, thro' their instigations (thus strongly supported) to go up with Ahab to battle, and expose his life to the most imminent hazard---But this is only a trifling specimen of that wrong bias which history has illustrated by such glaring and melancholy proofs.

IN this light, I may refer to the treatment which CHRIST and his doctrines at first met with from the world. Was this owing to the real nature of his character and instructions, ---That the *one* was bad---and the *other* false and delusive ?---No----By the confession of his enemies, *he spoke as never man spake*. They allowed, with astonishment, *no man could do the works which he did, except G O D was with him*----But the cause had been judged and determined before----*Can any good thing come out of Nazareth ?*----*Is not this the carpenter's son ?*----*Have any of our rulers and great men believed on him ?* Such were the daily expressions, which shewed the sentiments of their minds ; and teach us the influence which numbers, authority, and external appearance, have to warp the judgment, and prevent the spread of truth.

NOR are their effects confined here : since nothing has tended more to corrupt and destroy it, when discovered, and made known to mankind---Thus we see how soon the doctrines of Christianity were altered, and evaded by the powers of this world : How quickly an assumed sacredness of character,
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supported by cunning, and yielded to by indolence and credulity, prepared the way for the most daring innovations----Namely, a contempt of scripture authority, a prostitution of its most sacred rights, and the introduction of every low artifice, which could enslave the human race.----The manner in which men of corrupt minds have been suffered to rise to power in the church of CHRIST, the deference paid to their opinion, the undue influence which they have acquired over their fellow creatures, and the unhappy effects which have flowed from hence, are standing memorials of our danger; and point out the true method of avoiding it.

WHEN *Luther*, *Calvin*, and other reformers attempted from the new Testament to shew the errors of the romish church; it's defenders immediately fled for shelter to the authority of some antient fathers, the decisions of their councils, and their established creeds and confessions; and, if the foundation of their reasoning had been equally valid with the inferences drawn from it, we must allow they had much the better of the argument---Devoutly, is it to be wished, that the same views and principles, tho' expressed

pressed by different parties, and under different colourings and denominations, had never entered into the plan and constitution of our reformed churches---But alas ! when will the happy time come ? Wherein men, laying aside their prejudices and passions, shall acknowledge CHRIST, as their only spiritual LORD ; and accept his word, as the sole rule of their faith and conduct : When they will be influenced, not by human authority, but rational enquiry and conviction ; and, truth will appear an acquisition, which depends, not upon fancy and opinion, but is, in its own nature, fixed and unalterable ; to be fought with care, founded upon evidence, embraced after inward conviction, adhered to with fidelity and resolution, followed so far, as we can discover it, and prized above every other object. A

4. OBSERVATION arising from the history is, the just *distinction* to be made betwixt a desire of knowledge, and a love of truth.

AHAB could earnestly adjure Micaiah, in the name of the LORD, to tell him the truth : Yet he hated both the speaker, and the truths he delivered. He wished for such information

tion as might gratify his desires, but any thing contrary to them, how true so ever in its own nature, could find no admittance.

THIS is a picture of those persons' minds, who, while they appear eager after knowledge, search for it, only, in such a particular track, as tends to feed, rather, than discover their prejudices ; and to narrow, instead of opening and enlarging the powers of the mind.-- They will read with pleasure any thing which appears to confirm their pre-conceived sentiments ; while nothing is relished, which attempts to shew the fallacy of these sentiments themselves---But where a sincere love of truth prevails, we are disposed to hear arguments against, as well as in favour of, our opinions--No man is esteemed an enemy, who, with candour and temper, attempts to convince us of our error ; and we become on the one hand, ready to part with the most darling tenet after such conviction, as on the other, firmly to adhere to truths which, upon this evidence, appear reasonable and well grounded. In fine, a desire of knowledge may arise only from the head, but a love of truth is ever the offspring of a well regulated heart---This will appear more fully from observing.

5. THE different *light*, in which the same subjects appear, and are considered, according as time, reflection, and other causes, have contributed to remove our prejudices, and moderate our passions.

THE concluding event in the history before us, soon taught the Israelites, how little they could rely upon external appearances ; But, this was a lesson, which, if prejudice and passion had not intervened ; they might probably, have known before. At first, we are apt to consider every thing which opposeth our present views and sentiments with disgust---It is an attack upon the sloth of the indolent mind---the self sufficiency of the wise and conceited---and the darling pursuits and worldly interests of the wicked and corrupt heart---But, where our reason is allowed full scope, and we examine with candour and impartiality ; suspending our judgment when the evidence is weak, and altering it where we find ourselves mistaken---Such a conduct, (which is the attendant upon well regulated affections,) would enable us to discern, what experience alone, can teach others ; and quickly overturn the baseless fabrick of error and falsehood.

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WHEN the pure and benevolent religion of JESUS was first propagated, what could be esteemed so false and dangerous; or actually, was treated with higher contempt: while, men in succeeding ages, whose prejudices are removed, and their reason and judgment allowed free exercise, have considered it as the power and wisdom of God to their eternal salvation.—What? was ever thought more erroneous, or abounding with greater heresy, than the doctrines of the Reformation: What horror did it's, (then esteemed,) impious tenets excite in the minds of men; who many of them thought that *Antichrist*, or the end of the world, was most certainly come--- And yet, we can perceive and acknowledge it was the cause of truth, liberty, and righteousness.

SUCH striking instances, and remarkable variations as these, (all owing to the manner and disposition with which we consider objects) should certainly make us cautious in censuring and rejecting any sentiments proposed to our attention, at the present day, without, their undergoing a strict examination. In guarding against error, one essential step is,

is, to enquire what is such ; least, as in the cases above mentioned, we be found opposers of the truth, and of that doctrine which is according to godliness.

AND let us consider, if light hath broke in upon that night of darknels which Popery introduced, what, should prevent the possibility, or even certainty, of higher and greater discoveries being made? Is not the world capable of improvement? Are not other arts and sciences rising by the labour of ages? And may I not appeal to every private christian, who reads his bible with the least attention, whether some errors are not corrected, or some truths set in a clearer light, by every fresh perusal?---What, therefore, should hinder the ministers of the gospel, at the present day, (whose employment it is to study the scriptures) from making higher advances in divine truth and knowledge---Are there no errors which may have escaped detection, nor any doctrines which can admit new light being thrown upon them? Valuable as the labours and attainments of our forefathers were, yet, did wisdom die with them? Have not succeeding ages their works to build upon? And may not the ministers of the

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gospel,

gospel, in every period, by the exercise of the same powers, equal application, and, attended with the divine blessing and assistance, prove the means of enlarging our christian knowledge and improvement ?

6. How evidently then, are men enemies to the spread of truth, and their own interest, when like Ahab, they *bate* those ministers who speak not what is agreeable to their sentiments and inclinations,

As error and vice are evils to which we are all liable ; so, wherever they take place, they resemble some disorders of the human body, which make us loath what would be of the utmost service, and covet what tends to our misery and ruin---*I hate him*, saith Ahab, *because he prophesies not good but evil concerning me*---Yet, we know the evil he spoke, if Ahab had attended to it, might have saved him from destruction---Nevertheless, there was, and ever will be, in the same situation, a much greater chance of not hearing it at all---Upon a weaker and more timid spirit, such a temper as Ahab's, would have had it's effect ; and, in the room of truth, the best he could expect was silence ; and, not improbably, the wretched

wretched soothings of destructive flattery and falshood. If this prince's inclinations had varied often, as the wind, here were four hundred persons ready, like the weather cock, to have veered round with them---The crafty and self interested are sure to take advantage of our folly in this respect; while the timid, tho', in general, honest person, will behold us either with silent grief; or, probably, while he seeth us ignorant and naked as to truth and virtue, pass by, *like the priest and Levite, on the other side.*

It may be asked (and left to every man's judgment to give the answer) whether it is not expected from ministers of the gospel, that they impartially enquire into, and faithfully recommend, the doctrines and precepts of it? Would he wish that one, whom he has chose to bear witness to the truth, should pay greater regard to his approbation, than the real advancement of christianity? Or could he esteem the person, who, in order to gain a scanty support, submits to the base drudgery of flattering his prejudices, and accommodating the gospel to his taste, tho' contrary to his own better informed judgment?----Such measures may, for the present, amuse and
give

give a temporary ease to the wicked and corrupt mind—But where is the man, in whose breast the least relish for truth and goodness remains, who would wish, like Ahab, good to be spoke, which has nothing but falsehood and flattery for it's foundation and support? Who, is there! but must admire the conduct and resolution of the prophet?----Who can avoid wishing! that every minister of the gospel might resemble him?

WILL you then allow me (if not already acquainted with it) to tell you a secret: namely, that nothing hath, or doth at present, so effectually prevent this, as the tempers of their respective hearers. It is, thro' all ages, certain, that if the people chuse to have it so; the prophets of the LORD lie under the strongest temptations to speak falsely: Only picture to yourselves, a minister of the gospel in his closet, examining into the will of his heavenly master, and you will readily admit, he ought to consider it with impartiality, and receive and recommend the truth in the love thereof. But, if he knows your temper is such, that the more he is concerned for your improvement, and the greater fidelity and freedom he exerciseth, the less will your love abound to him.

him. If his character shall be traduced---Your contributions lessened or withdrawn---Your friendship and kind regards wholly alienated---Will all this, think you, have no influence to damp the ardour of enquiry ; to darken and obscure his expressions ; and make him silent, as to many truths ; which, (tho' not absolutely essential to future happiness) might enlarge your christian knowledge, and heighten your religious pleasure and joy ? Suppose him yet farther, in a great measure, if not wholly, dependent upon you for his support in life----Perhaps, surrounded with a numerous and helpless family, who look up to him for their daily bread---And can you think there is here, no temptation to prevaricate ; or, that a person will examine so carefully, or speak so freely, when want and distress are the consequences of it ?

IF you would therefore, promote the spread and interests of truth, encourage your ministers, by every means in your power, to examine into, and speak it. Remember, they are men subject to like passions with yourselves ; equally to be influenced by fear ; warped by self interest ; and swayed by a love of popularity-----If you think them erroneous, pity

pity and pray for them as *weak*, but censure and hate them not, (where you perceive diligence of enquiry and goodness of heart) as *wicked* and *corrupt* brethren----Such a temper on your side, will encrease a love of, and desire to spread, the truths of christianity on their's ----In fine; when they are thus treated with candour and generosity; and perceive you approve their well meant concern and intentions----That you judge of them, not from partial views, but general uprightness and honesty of character; they will not fail to declare the whole counsel of God; and both speaker and hearer become mutually advancing in religious knowledge, hope, and joy. The

7. AND last observation is---The excellent *pattern* here afforded by the prophet, for all ministers to copy after and imitate.

If these events of former ages were recorded, as an inspired apostle observes, for our examples; the present character merits, in an especial manner, your attention, my Reverend Brethren, and my own. Our office, duty and general qualifications, (if we except the gift of inspiration and an immediate mission

sion from God) are similar to his---And from our character and profession, we lie under an indispensable obligation to preach the gospel, and bear witness to the truth, so far as we can become acquainted with it.

DILIGENCE of enquiry attended with the divine blessing, is the only foundation and means for becoming acquainted with the doctrines of christianity: and to speak them like the prophet, with resolution and sincerity, the great proof of our love of it, and regard for mankind.

It must readily be allowed, that, as this invaluable trust is committed to weak and fallible men; we ought ever to be duly sensible of our own liability to ignorance and error. We have constant reason to guard against the pride and vanity of our own minds; and prudence and discretion should direct in the exercise of our profession, and the intercourse we hold with mankind-----But shall we, under the plea of being governed by these excellent virtues, give way to that timid spirit, which makes us ashamed of truth, and engages us to seek a cloak for our real sentiments?-----Is there no danger of our be-

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coming lukewarm friends to its cause and interest, and suffering the temptations and difficulties we experience to bias our judgment, weaken our zeal, and throw our expressions into obscurity?

WE are not, it is true, exposed, like the prophet Micaiah, to immediate suffering; neither have we the solicitations of a messenger to resist, or the anger of an enraged prince to apprehend; but there are, my Brethren, innumerable other secret engines at work within our breasts, which often do the business more effectually-----Indolence, self interest, a love of ease, and desire of popularity, may all be considered as messengers, who insinuate themselves into the heart; and weaken our ardour and resolution.

THE language in which they address us is similar to what we find used in the history before us. "To what purpose is it, will they
 "plead, for you to employ pains in studying
 "the doctrines of christianity, and learning
 "the will of your heavenly master----Adopt,
 "if you are wise, the popular sentiments; let
 "your words be agreeable to the tenets of
 "your forefathers; and suited to the prejudices

“ dices of the age in which you live. In fine--
 “ speak that which they esteem good, and
 “ you secure their favour, you will enjoy
 “ their countenance and support. But should
 “ conscience remonstrate ; and you cannot,
 “ without pain, thus far give up a re-
 “ gard to truth ; chuse a middle and more
 “ easy course----Endeavour to model your
 “ expressions after such a manner, that a
 “ double, or different sense may be put upon
 “ them, which you may understand in one
 “ light, and your hearers in another. Study
 “ not to give them clear views of what you
 “ are recommending ; but by an affected
 “ ambiguity of stile and sentiment, to render
 “ your own situation quiet and easy. Look
 “ shy at, and keep aloof from, those of your
 “ Brethren, whose sentiments, you would
 “ have your people to believe, are different
 “ from your own ; and now, and then, in-
 “ veigh against the errors of some obnoxious
 “ party ; tho’ in your own private judgment,
 “ the form of an expression, or the mere
 “ alteration of a trifling word, is the only
 “ ground of difference and separation. These
 “ are the practices, my friends, to which we
 “ would advise you---For why should you
 “ wilfully expose yourselves to the frowns and
 “ resent-

“relentment of mankind? Why, for the sake
 “of truth, incur the imputation of singula-
 “rity, forfeit your repose-----injure your
 “fortunes-----and lose the esteem of your for-
 “mer friends and wellwishers?---Forego then
 “these visionary romantic schemes-----consult
 “wisely for your own interest, and speak
 “that which others may receive as good, and
 “palatable to their inclinations.”

AFTER such a manner, my brethren, and
 often with too persuasive rhetoric, does the
 world accost us. But, in looking on the
 other side, we behold truth, or rather CHRIST
 the great author of it, thus, affording a power-
 ful antidote to it's allurements.

“Go on, my friends, will he say, in the
 “support of my cause and interest, with un-
 “shaken fidelity and resolution. Let this be
 “the motto of your christian arms-----
 “WE PREACH NOT OURSELVES, BUT CHRIST
 “JESUS THE LORD-----You will not
 “probably, in such a course, gain the
 “honours and emoluments of the world;
 “but you will secure inward peace of mind.
 “It may not procure general esteem and ex-
 “tensive popularity, but you will possess the
 “regard

“ regard of the truly wise and good----On
 “ many occasions, you will suffer for your
 “ honest attachment to my cause ; but, ere
 “ long, you will, like the prophet, appear
 “ with greater advantage. Finally, remem-
 “ ber, that with the most refined arts of
 “ falshood and dissimulation, all you can pos-
 “ sibly attain, is the short lived applause of
 “ mankind, and the transitory enjoyments of
 “ this present world : but if you are faithful
 “ to me-----If you have a single eye to my
 “ glory, and the interest of my kingdom, you
 “ will be owned and applauded at the gene-
 “ ral day of accounts, and enter upon the
 “ unfading joys of a blessed eternity ”-----
 Which of these alternatives, my Brethren, a
 wise man would chuse, need not be men-
 tioned-----May God of his infinite mercy so
 direct and assist us, that we may be found
 faithful here, and receive at last the approba-
 tion of our great LORD and Head.

F I N I S.

